

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #77 answer: ELEPHANT'S FOOT (*Elephantopus carolinianus*)

What's elephantine about Elephant's foot? The basal leaves of some members of *Elephantopus* lie flat and are very large (but not really as large as an elephant's foot). Our species has basal leaves of more modest size (maybe the size of a moose's foot). You might notice how densely hairy they are, and how the lower leaves clasp the stem, tapering dramatically to it.

At the top of the hairy stem is the other attention-getter, three leaflike bracts around close-packed clusters of flower heads. There are 3 to 20 of these heads, each holding a few disk flowers. If you tease out one flower, you will see it is asymmetrical, splaying five long lavender lobes to one side, like the spread fingers of a hand. Imagine four hands meeting at the wrist. In this manner, four skimpy flowers seem to form one ample flower with 20 petals. All the flowers of one head bloom at the same time, encouraging this illusion.

The long anthers unite into a tube. The style grows up through this tube, pushing clumps of white pollen ahead of it. At the top it splits into stigmas. There you might find beetles, aphids, butterflies, skippers, and moths busy feeding.

Elephantopus thrives in sunny pastures but can put up with shade and considerable disturbance. Deer eat it sparingly, perhaps because of its chemicals.

Species of *Elephantopus* have long been of use in herbal medicine. Recent research finds the compound deoxyelephantopin suppresses tumor growth in breast cancer and metastasis in lung cancer. Other chemicals have potential against leukemia and cervical cancer. If so, this quirky, unassuming plant could end up with a big footprint indeed.

WILDFLOWER #78

Clues: Small brown stalks blend in with leaf litter in the fall.



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